

Zdenek Fibich - Complete Symphonies (1998)

Written by bluesever

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CD1 1. *Symphony No. 1 in F major, Op. 17: I. Allegro moderato* 14:42 2. *Symphony No. 1 in F major, Op. 17: II. Scherzo and Trio: Allegro assai* 4:28 3. *Symphony No. 1 in F major, Op. 17: III. Adagio non troppo* 5:51 4. *Symphony No. 1 in F major, Op. 17: IV. Finale: Allegro con fuoco e vivace* 9:20 5. *Symphony No. 2 in E flat major, Op. 38: I. Allegro moderato* 8:48 6. *Symphony No. 2 in E flat major, Op. 38: II. Adagio* 7:25 7. *Symphony No. 2 in E flat major, Op. 38: III. Scherzo and Trio: Presto* 8:32 8. *Symphony No. 2 in E flat major, Op. 38: IV. Finale: Allegro energico* 8:43
CD2 1. *Symphony No. 3 in E minor, Op. 53: I. Allegro inquieto* 10:59 2. *Symphony No. 3 in E minor, Op. 53: II. Allegro con fuoco - Adagio* 8:40 3. *Symphony No. 3 in E minor, Op. 53: III. Scherzo and Trio: Vivo e grazioso* 7:07 4. *Symphony No. 3 in E minor, Op. 53: IV. Allegro maestoso - Allegro vivace* 10:41
Detroit Symphony Orchestra Neeme Järvi -conductor

Fibich is the lesser known of the nationalist Czech composers writing in the latter part of the 19th Century yet his music is as colourful, melodic and passionate as any works by his compatriots Dvorák and Smetana. It is full of joie-de-vivre. Fibich was a generation younger than Smetana and nine years younger than Dvorák. His music is neither firmly Germanic or overtly nationalistic Czech, but it embraces both influences in equal measure.

Composition of the First Symphony in F Major commenced while the composer was still at Leipzig Conservatory in 1877 but it was not performed until 1883. The work is genial and brims with sparkling melodies. One quickly notices that Fibich prefers to write faster music and Maestro Järvi propels the music strongly forward. The first movement is considerable, lasting some 15 minutes. Another Fibich device that one soon notices is his predilection for sequences (favoured also by Elgar - and in places, in these symphonies, Fibich's music does sound very Elgarian). The music is also very well constructed and balanced so that one's ears are captivated by the sheer elegance of its ebb and flow. There is a fresh out-of-doors feel about it too - one can imagine Alpine pastures (the CD booklet cover illustration is therefore apt) and village celebrations with folk dancing. The fast and furious second movement continues this

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celebration with lively folk music spiced with quasi-fugal elements. The third Adagio movement begins as though it is a dignified and refined minuet before there are darker musings in the lower strings with self-important commentary by the brass. This is a more deeply felt movement, contrapuntally rich with impressive writing for divided strings and passionate climaxes. The finale returns to faster material but more moods are explored. The music is strong, confident, assertive; and there is more of a feeling of national pride. Some of the material echoes folk melodies used by Smetana and Dvořák.

Fibich's Second and Third Symphonies are amongst his finest works and both were written at the time of his affair with one of his pupils - the talented but headstrong Anezka Schulzová, and the music seems to celebrate the union. Earlier, Fibich's first wife had died and he married one of her sister's only to abandon her and his children in favour of Schulzová. From 1892 to 1899 he kept a musical diary charting his affair in the form of piano Moods, Impressions and Reminiscences (a selection of which is available on CHANDOS 9381). Melodies from this huge collection informed much of the music of Fibich's last years. Some of these melodies are heard in the Symphony No 2 in E flat major which begins in a grand sweeping, almost Brucknerian manner before the music swells passionately and becomes rather more Brahmsian. Gentler music follows which is juxtapositioned with more relentless cantering figures that suggest a hunting scene - Fibich pursuing his ideal? The prevailing mood is of elation and good humour. The early part of the Adagio is very beautiful - reminiscent of both Brahms and, very strongly, of Elgar with particularly appealing mid-lower string writing. The central section of the movement returns to folk material - contrasting the hesitant with the emphatic; darker material adding a wider perspective. Trumpets herald the Scherzo and Trio: Presto movement - another light-hearted, high spirited piece pausing midway for a more introspective slow dance but in the main it just bounces and bubbles along. The finale opens vigorously with a very infectious melody, and it dances along but pauses to include slower, more graceful, feminine material and ardent, yearningly romantic themes along the way. Heart-on-sleeve music devotees will wallow in this symphony.

The Symphony No 3 in E minor is written from the heart too but instead of treating it as a thematically unified cycle, Fibich progresses from minor to major - from (relative) darkness to light. Indeed the music, this time, has a Mahlerian feel about it. It begins mysteriously and a little menacingly but it is impossible to repress Fibich for long and the music soon bubbles along. Happier, swiftly paced, dotted rhythms usher in more lyrical and warmly romantic material yet small clouds persist in the background. Larger, grander, more nationalistic issues are also covered. The second Allegro movement has another stately opening and a dialogue between dictatorial strings and pleading woodwinds ensues. There is the beginnings of what one feels would have been a glorious Brahmsian heart-felt theme which is left frustratingly undeveloped. Again Elgar's nobilmente writing comes to mind in this lovely movement. Once more, I was taken with the wonderfully balanced polytonal writing and beautifully symmetrical structure. The Scherzo & Trio: Vivo e grazioso third movement is an untroubled and sunny Mendelssohnian dance with some interesting effects. The finale returns to the mood of the first movement with

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another dark, eerie, brooding opening but again Fibich soon asserts more optimistic and heroic material. There are surging romantic melodies aplenty and this marvellous cycle of symphonies ends in glorious affirmation.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra give virtuoso readings of all three symphonies which are recorded in Chandos's best sound. ---lan Lace, musicweb-international.com

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